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Homecoming

by [Alison Glover](#)

(this one's for Harry, Lee and Nick)

Though Paradise be infinitely distant - separated by seas and mountains and thousands of millions of provinces - yet I tell thee; if only the path of thy spirit be smooth, thou canst reach it overnight.

Genshin

There's a vision coming soon

Through the faith that cleans your wound

Hearts of olden glory will be renewed.

Down the glens where the headlands stand

I feel a healing through this land

.....There must be a place under the sun,

Where hearts of olden glory grow young

Runrig

"Yes, the Tirian title Comarlach is usually translated into Standard as Advisor," Shivon said to her interviewer, a visiting Wookiee historian. "The position in some ways parallels the Wookiee one of -"

But her guest was spared her attempts at pronouncing his language.

"Comarlach, apologies for interrupting -"

Shivon spun to face the opening door, not because she was annoyed - Vhari wouldn't have disturbed her unless it was important - but because of the sharp note of concern in her assistant's voice.

"There's a communication for you from Naboo," Vhari went on. "On a priority channel -"

"The one I've been expecting," Shivon finished for her. Shivon had thought that she'd kept her own voice perfectly level and her face composed. However, the Wookiee rose quickly, bowed, and announced that he would return at another, more appropriate, time.

"Thank you," Shivon said, more absently than she'd intended. She already knew the content of this communication, which was why she was dealing with less demanding tasks, such as this interview. Tasks she didn't need to concentrate to perform.

My brother is dead.

She and Qui-Gon had spent very little time together since they'd been small children. As adults sometimes it had only been a day or two every couple of years. But she'd always been aware, however many light-years had separated them, that he was still *there*.

Until two days ago, when she'd felt him die. She'd always been sure that she would know if anything happened to him, but she hadn't thought to experience it so vividly, to have seen for those last moments through his eyes...

Now, where that awareness of him had always been, there was only a dull, empty ache.

So she'd been waiting for this, expecting it as soon as the hyper-links to Naboo were restored.

She leaned on the side of her desk, activating the holo-imager on the worn comms unit.

Since she'd only been able to guess at what might have happened on Naboo after Qui-Gon's death, she felt a surge of relief at seeing young Ben alive and apparently uninjured. The holo transmission was fuzzy and wavering, less clear than the vision that she'd kept replaying in her head, trying to make sense of what had happened. It was almost a surprise to see Ben perfectly controlled, just as a Jedi should be, not tear-stained and desperate, as he'd been when leaning over her dying brother.

"Shivon," said Qui-Gon's padawan, pushing back the hood of his cloak. "I'm so sorry - I have bad news for you."

"Ben," she said gently. It was odd; over the years she'd grown used to her brother's Jedi name, but she'd never been able to think of young Obi-Wan as anything but 'Ben'. "I know. Qui-Gon's dead."

Ben just nodded.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

She took that to mean that he was uninjured. Otherwise, he might outwardly be the epitome of the calm, centred Jedi, but she knew that was not how he felt.

Poor Ben. Master Yoda will doubtless have been such a pillar of emotional support to you.

Part of her was aware that she was, as usual, keeping her own feelings at bay with sarcasm and with worrying about someone else.

She could just imagine Yoda. *At one with Force Qui-Gon is. Grieve you need not.* It had never made any difference how often she was assured of the old Jedi's wisdom, or that beneath his inverted grammar and vague platitudes he was really compassionate. Qui-Gon had been Yoda's padawan and the old Master's continual criticisms had made him unhappy as a child; Shivon had never been able to respect Yoda, let alone like him.

The holo flickered. Shivon adjusted the imaging system, trying to improve the reception. She peered at the grainy image, worried. Was it the poor quality of the transmission, or the lighting on Naboo that made young Ben's face seemed so shadowed? Or something else?

He was explaining, in an impeccable Core Worlds' accent and tones as calm as a droid's that the body had been cremated before Naboo's communications net had been repaired.

She nodded. It was customary for the Jedi to burn their dead. Perhaps she should be relieved that there had been a body. She'd heard rumours that sometimes there was not, that somehow the Jedi continued as disembodied spirits, still desperately trying to influence the corporeal. She'd always found that concept repulsive.

Shivon glanced away from the holo, through the wide window of her office. She looked out over the roofs and spires and parks of the ancient city she loved so much, to the gently rolling hills beyond. As always, the feeling of continuity, the knowledge that people had lived here since a pre-history remembered only in the oldest of tales, was a source of strength and comfort. There's a healing in this land, the old songs said, and she'd always found that to be true.

She hadn't realised until now how strongly she felt about this. It wasn't that she had any sure belief in some Blessed Realm beyond her homeworld's sunset. Or in the ancient but still-practiced traditions that there were times and places where the living and the dead could communicate. But if there were any chance any of it was true... Besides, the Jedi had had enough of Qui-Gon when he was alive.

And she needed to know exactly what had happened, not the terse report that was all the Jedi Council would release. More than that... it had been nearly a year since she'd seen Qui-Gon, and then only briefly. Perhaps she was being selfish, but she didn't want to be deprived of that year of her brother's life. The person who could give it to her, who had been with Qui-Gon for almost all of it, was Ben.

That her brother's padawan wasn't genetically her nephew was a detail she'd always ignored.

She focused back on the holo. "Bring him home," she said. The transmission had stabilised momentarily and she could see the haunted look in the young man's eyes.

Such an action might mean nothing to the dead, but it would comfort her and the rest of the family. Perhaps young Ben would find solace in it, too.

It felt like he desperately needed to find solace in something.

And that sense of a shadow over him... she needed him to be physically present to know if that was grief.

Or something darker.

* * * *

"Any problems with the transmission?" the Communications Centre duty officer asked. "The link to Coruscant is stable now, but the longer-range systems aren't completely restored yet."

Obi-Wan Kenobi belatedly realised that he was still staring through, rather than at, a blank comms screen. "No, there were no problems, thank you."

"Oh, hell..." That wasn't addressed to Ben. The duty officer, shoving up the sleeves of his grubby coverall, flopped into an empty seat behind the main control console and swore at whatever the combination of flickering orange and red displays was telling him.

The technician beside him adjusted something on her own console, then shook her head. "It's no good. We're losing the Dreed ground-station relays. Must be more badly damaged than we thought."

"Maybe the Trade Federation's master plan was that if they fried, rather than jammed, half our systems, they'd make a handsome profit selling us the replacements. Anyone we can spare to send down there?"

"Kirray and Nabil are the experts on..." the technician began. She stopped, grimacing. "*Were* the experts." She shook her head again, running her hands through her untidy short hair. "I keep forgetting. I suppose I just don't want to believe I'll never see them again."

The duty officer leaned over to rub his colleague's shoulder. He sighed heavily. "I know. I'm still hoping I'll wake up tomorrow and it'll all have been a bad dream."

You're hardly the only person on Naboo with loss to deal with, Ben reminded himself. Both technicians looked exhausted. Like so many of the Naboo, they still had that dazed, 'it wasn't supposed to happen here' look. He waited until she'd rubbed her sleeve over her eyes before he spoke. "Thank you for all your help. I do appreciate it." Since he couldn't think of anything more original to say, he hoped his gratitude showed in his voice.

Perhaps it had; he got a couple of brief smiles before they bent back over their insistently flashing boards.

He could almost see another smile, too. Qui-Gon's quick, familiar one of approval, for his apprentice being considerate of others' feelings and efforts...

...the familiar smile that Ben didn't want to believe he'd never see again.

He resettled the cloak he was wearing, ignoring the nagging ache in his shoulders from muscles torn in breaking his fall into the melting pit. He ran one hand absently over the cloak's rough fabric as he strode out of the Comms

Centre, deciding not to wait for the end of the banquet which had followed the never-ending victory parade. There would be fewer explanations to make, if he had it all organised.

Ben was not in the mood for long explanations.

The Jedi Council could doubtless locate him if they wanted to. They were closeted away in one of the palace conference rooms. Presumably they were talking, since Ben had never known them to do anything but talk.

Anakin was at the banquet, absolutely delighted that he'd persuaded the Chancellor to seat him beside Amidala, who'd also seemed, in her royal persona's detached way, pleased. Perhaps it was Ben's own unhappiness clouding his thoughts, but he felt the two of them should make the most of whatever little joys life had to offer while they could.

But that, at least, was simpler, now that the Council had decreed that Anakin should be trained. Not that it would have made any difference if they hadn't. He'd promised Qui-Gon, so he would train the boy, no matter what reservations Yoda might have.

Or he still had himself....

But it was a relief that he didn't have to start now, because he must fulfil Shivon's request first.

* * * * *

"Heard from those Gungans, Pardur?" Sshill-zan-Zryt, captain of the independent trader *-Fortune's Egg*, inquired of her cargo-master. She looked up from the wrist-comp on which she was calculating hyperspace trajectories, scaled tail tapping absently on the cracked and blackened petricrete of the landing bay. Naboo's main commercial starport had been badly damaged in the Trade Federation attack.

"Yes. They'll be a couple of hours at the latest. Worth waiting for, if the specs on their superconductors and isolation field generators are accurate." The cargo-master, a lithe Trianni, leapt down from the *Egg's* main hatch and continued, "We were the first in here after the blockade and we'll be one of the first out with the Gungan technology, too. Kind of the Federation to help us make such a good profit on this run."

"To us, yes. Not so kind to the Naboo or the Gungans."

Pardur, ever practical, shrugged. "Better the Trade Federation blockading them than trying to shut all us Indies down. Though why they thought it worth the

expense of attacking this little world is beyond me." He stopped, making a little half-growl in his throat, as he looked behind Sshill out into the main hangar and twitched an ear.

Sshill swivelled her eye-stalks in the direction he'd indicated, her large body turning more slowly. A robed figure was striding purposefully toward the *Fortune's Egg*. A figure in long, black, hooded robes.

"A Jedi," Sshill hissed quietly. Like all Indie traders, she wasn't keen on authority of any kind. "What does a Jedi want with us?"

"It had better not be to tell us we need an export license for those Gungan goods after all," Pardur muttered.

The Naboo repair teams and the motley assortment of Indie freighter crews looked up curiously from their work as the Jedi strode past, but he, she, or it paid them no heed. There were some strange rumours about Jedi circulating round the 'port. One was that the destruction here had been their fault because they'd failed in some important negotiation. Another was that the Jedi were now taking control of the planet, because apparently their entire High Council was here.

Could the first rumour be true? Although not actually running, the Jedi did seem to be in a hurry. But surely a fugitive Force-user would have some better way off-world than hitching a ride on an Indie freighter?

There were also other ridiculous stories doing the rounds, about some human child having destroyed the Federation Command Ship and saved Naboo, to which Sshill gave no credence at all.

"May we assist you?" Pardur asked the Jedi, in Standard.

"I'm looking for passage to the Tir-Eora system. The port-master said you were headed there and that you are leaving soon." The voice sounded human; male, with an aristocratic Core Worlds accent. The Jedi himself was still hidden by his enveloping black cloak.

Sshill flicked her forked tongue and exchanged an amused glance with Pardur, who was saying, "Depends. Are you looking to pay for that passage?"

Not that they'd need extra profit on this run, but it was the principle that counted. "And what business does a Jedi have in the Tir-Eora system?" Sshill added. She hoped the Senate wasn't sending him to investigate the Indie Traders' non-payment of trade route taxes.

The Jedi lowered his hood, revealing that he was human, but much younger than Sshill had expected. Clear blue eyes looked up at her. "I am not on Jedi

business." He bowed formally to Sshill, shifting from Standard to True-speech, which he pronounced surprisingly well. "Respected Captain, it is on a personal matter that I must travel now to Tir."

Sshill flicked her tongue again, this time because she was pleased. He hadn't, as so many Core Worlds humans did, jumped to the conclusion that because Pardur spoke first and was male and more humanoid, the *Egg* was his ship. It was always pleasant to meet a human prepared to speak languages other than Standard. "What is that matter, young Jedi?"

"It is my sad duty to return the ashes of my honoured " - the young man blinked, and Sshill wasn't sure if that was because he'd had to think of the correct word - "sensei to his homeworld."

Sshill bowed back. "Then it will be my honour to assist you, that his shade may linger in limbo no longer than is necessary." She didn't know what Jedi beliefs were, but both Tirian and her own people's traditions agreed that interment in some appropriate fashion was good for the dead - even if in reality it was the living that benefited from the symbolism. The young man seemed sincere, his hands still hidden in those long robes, and she didn't think he was trying any of the mind-tricks for which the Jedi were notorious. The least she could do was make a courteous reply. His face was perfectly composed, but Sshill had captained, bossed and mothered a multi-species crew for decades; there were, she noticed, dark smudges under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept for days. And for all his calm, controlled demeanour, there was something... something she couldn't quite put her claw on. Somehow he seemed vulnerable, which was the last thing she'd expected in a Jedi, however youthful.

She added, "In that case, there will be no fee for your passage." After all, if his story turned out not to be true, she could easily find some technicality for which to charge him.

"Thank you, Captain. May your ancestors reward this kindness to one you owed nothing."

It was pleasing that he had the knowledge and took the time, to be properly courteous, as so many humans did not. She studied him, as Pardur chimed in with the details of their planned departure time. There was something about the way the Jedi was standing.... Not the usual problem with Core Worlders, which was that they'd stand too close and crowd one's personal space; if anything, he was giving them more room than necessary. Sshill glanced at Pardur, who was, as usual, beside her, but leaving room for him to draw his blaster and for Sshill to swing her tail.

Ah, that was it. The Jedi wasn't standing straight on to either of them. *He's used to standing beside and behind someone who normally does the talking.*

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, as the dusty air of the hangar was swirled by a passing repulsor lift, but for an instant, Sshill could almost see another cloaked figure beside him.

* * * * *

"No, Anakin," Ben said firmly. "You can't come with me."

"But I thought I was going to begin Jedi training straight away."

Ben managed to smile and to keep from his voice his eagerness to be gone. "Learning patience *is* the beginning of Jedi training, Anakin. I won't be away long."

"Would you not like to stay here on Naboo, Anakin, until arrangements have been made to bring your mother here from Tatooine?" Amidala asked. Ben glanced at her. He hadn't given much thought, recently, to why the Naboo had elected a teenage girl as their titular ruler, but perhaps Amidala did have some diplomatic talents. Although Ben assumed she was also aware of it, she didn't point out that Anakin would be much safer on Naboo than going with Ben.

There was another Sith out there. Whether it was the master or the apprentice, it would be seeking revenge for its partner's death.

Amidala turned to Ben. "It is a Tirian custom, we understand, to return a person's remains to his homeworld?"

Actually, the legend had it that if a Tirian's body was not returned home, his spirit could not reach the afterlife and he'd become a wraith, fated to haunt the living until he could persuade one of them to return his bones to his native earth. Which must make it difficult, Ben thought, for the relatives and friends of Tirians who died as some of the Naboo pilots had, by being vaporised, but of course the tradition long pre-dated spaceflight.

"Qui-Gon still has - had - relatives on Tir," Ben said. "This is their request."

Anakin, predictably, pounced on that. "Master Qui-Gon had family?"

"Yes. Although he rarely saw any of them." *And Yoda disapproved of even that infrequent contact.*

"I miss him," Anakin announced.

Amidala's painted face still showed no expression, but her elaborate robes rustled. "For how long were you Master Qui-Gon's student, Jedi Kenobi?"

Ben fingered the braid that he hadn't yet cut off, with its bindings marking the milestones of his apprenticeship, brushed the unplaited end that symbolised the first, less structured years of his childhood training. The years of which Anakin was too old to have the luxury. "Nearly twenty years." He almost smiled, remembering how tall Qui-Gon had seemed to five-year-old Ben. When he'd been a child, he'd assumed that he'd know when he was ready to be a Jedi Knight, because by then he'd have grown as tall as Qui-Gon. But he never had.

Anakin's eyes widened. "Twenty years? It takes that long to become a Jedi?"

"It depends on the student," Ben said, choosing that answer over 'sometimes longer'. He wasn't at all surprised that Anakin's reaction was to look determined that it wasn't going to take him that long. Or that the boy had missed making the connection between that length of time and the fact that Ben might also be missing Qui-Gon.

Be fair, Ben. What matters to Anakin is that the grateful Naboo have voted to buy Shmi from Watto, whatever the price, and bring her here.

If only Ben's loss could be rectified so easily.

Amidala's robes rustled again, as one of her handmaids (Sabe, Ben decided, though they all looked so alike, swathed in their orange robes) handed her a package wrapped in black silk. The Queen spoke very formally. "We are truly sorry for your loss, Jedi Kenobi, and mindful that it was in our cause that Master Qui-Gon died."

Amidala unwrapped the package, revealing a beautifully carved wooden box. She held it out to Ben. "We regret that we have no words that will assuage grief." She sighed, and underneath the paint and the formality, Ben could read real pain. "No words for you, nor for our own bereaved, nor for the Gungans'."

Ben was waiting for Anakin to say or do something; after all, it was permissible for a child to address royalty in a fashion that would not be appropriate for an adult. Especially an adult newly-made Jedi Knight who was being carefully watched for signs of his teacher's 'defiance'.

Surely the boy would care about Amidala's obvious sorrow for her and her allies' dead? But Anakin said nothing, and that nagging doubt that had haunted Ben ever since Qui-Gon had first encountered the boy crystallised again. Ben didn't remember having had much concern for most adults' feelings when he'd been nine years old himself, but sometimes it almost felt as if, for all his outward friendliness, there was something missing from Anakin.

How can you be so Force-sensitive, and so fond of Amidala, yet seem to have so little empathy for her? Even Jar Jar Binks seems more aware of how seriously

she takes her responsibilities to her people. You always seem so wrapped up in yourself...

Probably that was just a survival mechanism that Anakin would have needed, growing up Force-sensitive in Mos Espa. From what Qui-Gon had said, the slave quarters on Tatooine had been infinitely better than hell-holes like Kessel, but it still couldn't have been easy for Anakin.

The Queen was continuing, "But we would be honoured if you would accept this, as a token of our esteem for Master Qui-Gon."

The realisation that she was really trying to help, giving something tangible when she had no other comfort to offer, was touching. But hiding his feelings was automatic now. There were no tears for Ben to blink from his eyes, before he too sought refuge in continued formality. "Thank you, your Highness. And now, if you will excuse me, I must go."

"Senator Palpatine had requested that you remain on Naboo to assist with the inquiry into the blockade until he returns to Coruscant. But we believe that your duty to Master Qui-Gon and his family takes precedence. We wish you a safe and speedy journey, Jedi Kenobi."

* * * * *

As her crew loaded the last of the Gungan cargo, Sshill waited with interest for the Jedi to return. They were going to make extra profit on him, after all. The *Egg* had just received a formal communication from the Queen of Naboo herself, including a more than adequate credit transfer and a polite request that captain and crew give every assistance to one Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Knight, on his journey to Tir.

So the planet's titular ruler didn't think the Jedi had failed Naboo, then.

He was back in good time for the *Egg's* scheduled departure. This time his black cloak, which looked rather too long for him, was open, billowing behind him as he crossed the hangar with long, purposeful strides. Maybe he was eager to leave. All he was carrying was a bundle tucked under one arm and a small object cradled against his chest. The bundle appeared to be a roll of rough brown cloth, similar to his cloak.

Sshill considered the over-long cloak and his stride again and suddenly had an image of a taller man. The one that cloak had been made for, and whom the young Jedi must have been accustomed to hurrying to keep up with.

The other item young Kenobi was carrying was a small, ornately carved box, wrapped in a protective layer of clear polymer.

Presumably its contents were all that was left of that taller man.

She swivelled her eye-stalks apologetically. "Sorry, but I'll have to scan that."

The Jedi stared at her. "Why?"

"Because people have been known to smuggle things - spice, illegal micro-circuits, stolen database crystals - this way."

"That would never have occurred to me." The corners of his mouth twitched, as if he were going to smile at his own naivete.

Sshell activated her scanner, a model rather more sophisticated than its worn casing revealed, but it registered nothing other than organic ashes inside the box. And no weapons carried by the young man other than the lightsaber hanging from his belt. As she gestured for him to board her ship, she wondered if it was customary for Jedi to travel with so few possessions, or just because of the nature of his journey.

While Pardur sealed the cargo hatches, Sshell took a last look around the hangar. The movement of more flowing robes caught her eye. Blue this time, worn by a helmeted troupe that must be some dignitary's personal guard. Ah yes, it was that Naboo senator - the one that had just been elected Chancellor of the Senate. Obviously doing the rounds of the hangar and encouraging the repair teams.

Not being interested in platitudes from politicians, Sshell trundled up the ramp. Just before she closed the hatch, she half-turned and swivelled her eye-stalks. The senator had paused, and was staring towards the *Egg*, his smile seemingly frozen on his face. He was merely a middle-aged human, in one of the over-elaborate costumes which the Naboo loved so much, but which did little to flatter his somewhat chubby build. But Sshell found herself raising her tail, ready to strike and tracing in the air with one claw an old symbol for warding off evil.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Knight, turned out to be an exemplary passenger, keeping out of the crew's way and making no awkward requests. He only emerged once from the small cabin they'd cleared for him, to make a comm call to confirm their projected arrival time on Tir. Although he hadn't asked for anything, Sshell decided it would be polite to offer him some food, before her crew polished off the last of Second Engineer Bachacca's ikopi kebabs. Bachacca's hobby, a popular one with the crew, was cookery. At every port of call the Wookiee engineer would be down at the taverns, talking to the cooks, searching for new foods to try, or novel methods of preparing familiar ones.

Sshill's experience of young male humans was that they ate... well, like Wookiees.

When the door slid open, the Jedi was behind the small table that folded down from the cabin wall. He was standing very still, arms folded, hands hidden in the wide sleeves of his tunic. The little wooden box sat on the table. The Jedi's black cloak was folded neatly on the bunk. He looked smaller without it.

"I thought you might be hungry?" Sshill asked. The kebabs, in her opinion, smelt extremely appetising.

And then she cursed herself, because the young man paled and looked like he was trying hard not to vomit.

Sshill, you idiot. Have you no more brains than a newt? She glanced at the box. Ashes. And how is a body reduced to ashes, you thoughtless tadpole?

She hastily waved Bachacca and her cooking from the doorway, shut the door and flicked the air recycling fan to 'high' with her tail tip. "My apologies. We had not intended to distress or offend you." There was a haunted look in his eyes as he glanced at the wooden box and swallowed hard.

"I know you did not. No offence is taken." His face was once again composed, his voice calm, and the expression in his eyes now said that his reply had been quite literal, and he had indeed known their intentions.

Which was a rather alarming notion. Sshill was used to being able to hide her feelings from humans.

But there was still something about him that made her feel concerned, which she suspected was due not to his being a Jedi, but something innate in the young man himself. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Thank you, no. I would prefer to be alone."

"As you wish." As she palmed the cabin door closed Sshill looked back at him. That was the first thing he'd said that hadn't rung true. *No, young Jedi. I think that alone is not what you want to be, but how you feel.*

Ben sighed with relief as the door closed behind the freighter's reptilian Captain. *I know you mean well, but your concern just makes it worse.* Like when Adi Gallia had told him that Qui-Gon's death was an irreplaceable loss to the Jedi order and he'd realised that she meant it.

He resumed pacing the narrow cabin, arms wrapped tight round his middle. Vaguely, he wondered if he'd ever feel like eating anything ever again.

His mind seemed to be stuck in a recurring loop, like a malfunctioning droid. Every time he closed his eyes, he'd see images he hadn't the willpower to banish. Over and over again; the unknown Sith running Qui-Gon through, or his sensei falling back, a dead weight in his arms, or the sight and stench of the body burning....

The smell of that meat had been more than enough to take him back to the funeral even with his eyes wide open.

With the return of the Sith, the archaic practice of burning the corpse so that it could not be possessed by evil seemed less like mere superstition. Some more intellectual part of Ben still wondered, though, why the Council had insisted on that particular variation of a traditional Jedi funeral. Why leave the body uncovered? The cynical part of him answered that it had been another test, yet another opportunity for the apprentice of the troublesome Master Jinn to prove that he wasn't ready to become a Jedi. A Jedi should be calm, detached, at peace.... so Master Yoda had been reiterating for as long as Ben could remember.

But Ben had not felt calm. Nor peaceful. Nor anything like detached, as he'd watched Qui-Gon's hair catch light, and his face begin to char, and those big, capable hands blacken and wither...

Anger inevitably leads to the Dark Side, Yoda always said. Well, if that was so, Ben's soul was already lost. Anger and resentment had been all that had kept him standing there, desperately hiding his feelings, more from the Council than from Anakin, instead of either running off screaming, or flinging himself onto Qui-Gon's pyre. Anger at the Council, for not knowing that the Sith had returned, for the sense that some of them were relieved to be rid of Qui-Gon and his stubborn, contrary opinions, for not leaving Ben alone with his grief. Anger with Mace Windu and Yoda, in particular, for not having enough respect to remain silent. Anger with the Naboo and the Gungans, for planning a celebration - for what? For ending a conflict that should never have happened? Anger at Qui-Gon, for getting himself killed and leaving him.

And most of all at himself, for having let Qui-Gon die. For not having thought of all the things he should have done, instead of pacing uselessly... Just because neither he nor his lightsaber blade could penetrate that energy field didn't mean the Force couldn't. There had to have been some object he could have hurled at the Sith. Or he could have shoved the Sith himself into the melting pit. Or simply pushed the buttons on that double-bladed lightsaber and turned it off.

But he hadn't done any of that....

So he didn't much care about the state of his soul.

If he still had a soul, that was. He wasn't at all sure he did. He felt so empty.

Was this what falling to the Dark Side felt like? Except that Yoda always said that the Dark was easier, more seductive. There was nothing inviting or attractive about the void in Ben's heart and mind.

Maybe he should go back and confess to Yoda that he shouldn't have been made a Jedi, because right now he didn't care anything for the order's thousand year old traditions, or for the Council, or the Code, and he'd willingly see all the Jedi dead and the entire Republic laid waste, just to be able to talk to Qui-Gon again, and say all the things he'd always meant to, but had always thought there would be time for, later.

But there is no later.....

He stood still, staring bleakly at the little wooden box. How long it would take - years? decades? the rest of his life? - to stop wishing and hoping that somehow it had all been a nightmare, and that he'd wake up to feel Qui-Gon's hand on his shoulder and hear his reassuring voice, and that everything would be magically all right.

In the way that, however much trouble he'd got himself into, it always had been all right, for the past twenty years....

He couldn't really remember the first few years of his life, before he'd become Qui-Gon's padawan, just some confused images. He didn't know if he'd ever believed in anything more personal than the Force. Maybe this would be easier if he could believe in some of - any of - the motley collection of deities worshipped round the galaxy. He could find no comfort in Yoda's and Mace Windu's platitudes that Qui-Gon was now at one with the Force. Nor in still being connected to the living Force himself, of being aware that, on Naboo and elsewhere, life was going on. Not when the life that mattered to him most was over.

So he didn't know to whom he was praying, when he whispered, "Help me. I can't go on alone...."

He waited, and for a moment he could almost feel a strong hand gripping his shoulder and hear a familiar, lilting voice, full of concern, saying, "Ben...."

....and then there was nothing but the steady hum of the ship's hyperdrive.

Maybe he should read meaning into that, into the continuation of physical processes, regardless of the end of individual lives.

He ran his hands through his hair, began pacing again. *Well, you're going to have to read meaning into something, Ben, find some way to come to terms with this, because in this state you're no use to anyone; not to the Council, nor Anakin, nor yourself.*

(His imagination promptly supplied Qui-Gon's voice, saying gently, 'Impatient even with grief, young padawan?').

Perhaps that was where his worries about Anakin stemmed from. Not that, despite his age and his background, the boy would be unable to learn. That it would be from Ben's inadequacies as a teacher that the clouds shadowing Anakin's future would stem.

Why, he wondered again, had the Council decided to entrust Anakin to a teacher as inexperienced as Ben? Why should they respect Qui-Gon's views now, when it was too late, when they'd so rarely done so when he was alive? Perhaps they assumed that Ben and Anakin would both find the boy's training too demanding and simply give up. Or maybe Ben was so unimportant in the Council's greater scheme of things that it didn't matter how fallible he was.

He took a deep breath, tried yet again to still his mind, find some centre of calm. Whatever he should feel about being entrusted with an apprentice, it should not be only bitter resentment that Qui-Gon's last concerns had been for Anakin.

After taking the boy from his mother, of course Qui-Gon had to worry about him. He was so sure that Anakin is this "Chosen One". Don't be so childish and unreasonable, Ben.

Only reason was something he was wondering if he'd lost for good.

Maybe I'm just going crazy.

He stopped pacing. Maybe he was. There had been some odd whisperings among the lower ranks in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, strange stories about not only apprentices but fully-fledged Jedi suddenly becoming psychotic.

He tugged his tunic straight. *Be sensible, Ben. Anger and resentment are normal stages in the human grieving process. You didn't expect that being formally made a Jedi was suddenly going to make you immune to grief, did you?*

Perhaps not - although being Jedi has apparently made Yoda, Mace Windu and half of the Council immune to a whole host of emotions experienced by us lesser mortals.

Automatically, he glanced up, part of him still expecting Qui-Gon to be there, having caught, if not the exact words, the tone of that thought, and to be looking suitably stern and disapproving while smiling with his eyes.

But he wasn't.

Ben sagged down on the bunk, picked up Qui-Gon's cloak and buried his face in it. But, even though he was finally alone, he couldn't cry. Maybe if he could, he'd feel better, less as if he were frozen inside.

But he couldn't.

* * * * *

There was, Captain Sshell was pleased to see, someone waiting for young Kenobi when *Fortune's Egg* made planetfall on Tir. As Sshell confirmed their touchdown with the port authorities, the access port in the landing-bay blast-door opened and a human woman stepped through it. Wondering where she'd seen this person before, Sshell went herself to open the main hatch and lower the ramp. From there she could see that, although the woman was unaccompanied, the insignia on her tunic was that of a high-ranking member of the Tirian government. Yes, that was it; Sshell hadn't met her before in person, but she was one of the comarlach, the advisers to the Tirian government and Sshell had seen her on holocasts. And approved of her, as much as Sshell approved of any politician, because she had strongly opposed the Trade Federation's plans for expansion in this sector, the one where the league of Indie Traders had had its origins, all those centuries ago.

It seemed that it wasn't just on Naboo that the young Jedi had friends in high places.

The comarlach looked older than Sshell remembered and her face was sad and drawn, but when the young man emerged from the main hatch, she smiled.

"Ben!" she called, striding towards the ship.

Presumably that was a nickname; it didn't sound very Jedi-like. But then, after he'd bowed a formal farewell to Sshell, her passenger wasn't behaving in a very Jedi-like fashion, either. He leapt off the side of the ramp rather than walking down it and ran up to the woman, his long, thin braid flying. He was cradling the little wooden box against his chest again, the cloaks tucked under his arm, but he flung his free arm round her and leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Ben," the comarlach said again, hugging him back and kissing the top of his head. She was very tall for a human female, Sshill noticed, taller than the young Jedi when he straightened up.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was my fault."

The woman shook her head. "I don't believe that."

Sshill found that she didn't want to believe it either.

He was about to protest, Sshill thought, but the woman repeated, "I don't believe that, and neither did my brother."

Her brother... From the way she looked at the box, Sshill decided that she was referring to the deceased, not some still-living sibling. Sshill looked at the tall woman's features and suddenly she could put a face to the man that in her imagination was standing beside the two humans. Longer hair, though, and his was greying...

Sshill rotated her eye-stalks, and refocussed. For a moment, the older, taller Jedi had almost seemed real, solid.

How long was it since Sshill had had her eyes tested? *Too long*, she decided, resolutely turning her mind back to ship and cargo and crew.

* * * * *

They sat outside, on the grassy slope below the old stone hut, in a hollow out of the wind, looking out over the estuary as the evening faded into the long, gentle twilight of these high latitudes. The encircling hills turned from green through purple to soft, muted shades of brown and grey, and the water from blue-green to almost silver, as the dusk deepened.

Perhaps Ben wasn't soul-dead after all, because he could still see the beauty in this landscape that he'd been unable to perceive anywhere on Naboo.

He had forgotten how much Shivon looked like her brother, except that her eyes were grey and on her the familiar features were softer. She'd kept her hair brown, too, and it was short, much neater than Qui-Gon's had been. But the way she smiled with her eyes before she spoke was achingly familiar, and so was the lilt in her voice, although her Tirian accent was stronger than Qui-Gon's had been, after all his years of travelling. And she could be just as authoritative - not that Ben had had any objections to being handed a full glass of whiskey and being firmly instructed to drink it.

It was comforting, somehow, that in this woman and her children, something of Qui-Gon would go on. Ben felt rather less frozen inside, now.

Maybe that was just the whiskey.

The bottle lying between them was half empty, which perhaps explained why their conversation was so rambling.

Maybe it would have been rambling anyway.

Although Ben hadn't thought to ever be amused again, it almost made him smile, that Shivon still thought of Qui-Gon not as a venerable Jedi Master but simply as her beloved, but at times over-stubborn and totally exasperating, younger brother. He could remember many other rambling conversations here, when Shivon and Qui-Gon had sat talking, long into the night. All those nights talking, over the years, since Ben had been too young to understand what they were discussing, but had listened anyway until he'd fall asleep, lulled by their voices.

It helped, to be able to talk to the other person who'd known Qui-Gon best, who understood him in a way that the Jedi Council, had, for all their powers and reputed insight, never been able to do.

Ben wound down the sleeves of his under-shirt; it was not yet summer here and cool now that the sun had gone down, but he couldn't be bothered putting his tunic back on. It was very peaceful, after Coruscant, quiet but for the waves lapping on the rocks and the far-away cries of the gulls. Out over the water, the islands beyond the firth were merging with the clouds on the horizon. Above them shone Tir's evening star, its sister planet Eora. Dusk and dawn, the in-between times, when the veils between worlds grow thin... In the dimming light, Ben could almost believe that the Blessed Realm of legend existed, out there to the West, beyond the sunset.

Maybe that was just the whiskey, too.

He turned to look at Shivon. "You felt it when he died."

She ran one long finger over the carvings of the wooden box, which she had held in her lap all afternoon. "How would I not know when my own brother died, Obi-Wan Kenobi, even if my midi-chlorian count isn't that of a Jedi?" She reached out and rubbed Ben's shoulder, her hand warm through the thin fabric of his shirt, and went on, serious now, "Don't blame yourself, Ben."

He shook his head. "There must have been something I could have done."

"Qui-Gon didn't think so."

Ben thought back, to the fight he'd analysed over and over again. "After being caught by that side kick once in the hangar, I should have known the Sith would use it again. If I hadn't fallen.... Or if I'd run faster...."

"If you hadn't fallen, you might have had your head cut off," Shivon pointed out and repeated, "Qui-Gon didn't think it was your fault. He was just glad you were still alive."

It was strange, but despite the whiskey, Ben was thinking more clearly than he had on Naboo. So he didn't say, 'glad just because he wanted Anakin trained even without the Council's permission?' He knew now that wasn't true. He unhooked Qui-Gon's lightsaber from his belt, turned it over in his hands. "Was he thinking about this? I'm not sure where the inspiration to use his lightsaber came from. After, I thought maybe it was his idea, not mine."

"I don't know. I couldn't sense thoughts, just feelings, images..." Tears were running down Shivon's face again. She wiped them absently with her sleeve, then said, "I'm glad you killed the Sith."

"You think Qui-Gon's spirit will rest more peacefully because of that?"

"I don't know. But mine will." She smiled, fierce at first, then wryly, pulling a small knife from her boot. "I doubt I'd be up to a blood-feud with a Sith Lord."

"There's still the other one," Ben said, half-lost in his own thoughts.

"The other one?"

"There are supposed to always be two, and only two, Sith. A master and an apprentice." *And if that was the apprentice, the Jedi are in trouble.*

"Only two?" Shivon looked dubious. "If I were a Sith Lord and had dozens of Dark-side minions, I'd be highly amused if I'd convinced the Jedi there were only a couple of us."

Ben still wasn't really listening, concentrating instead on the murky possibilities of the future. "Whoever the other Sith is," he said quietly, "and however long and whatever it takes, I am going to see that he dies."

Shivon looked at him, sitting there with his knees drawn up, arms round his legs and chin resting on his arms, staring dry-eyed out over the water, the breeze ruffling his sandy hair. He looked younger, slighter, without the heavy Jedi tunic. But his youthful face was grim now, dangerous.

She fingered the hilt of her knife. It was a traditional feud knife - sharp point for stabbing, blade for cutting - that had been in the family for generations. If half the

tall stories associated with it were true, several of her ancestors had used it to permanently settle similar accounts. The uses to which Shivon put it were boringly domestic by comparison.

She still said, "Good."

And then wondered if she should have. She couldn't see the future as Qui-Gon had done, but sometimes moments had resonances, consequences that she could feel echo down the possibilities of what might be. She was sure this was one of them.

Yoda, no doubt, would disapprove of as base a desire as revenge.

She didn't care.

Partly, she blamed Yoda and Windu for Qui-Gon's death. Why had the Jedi Council, so powerful in the ways of the Force, been caught so completely unaware by the return of the Sith? Or had it been deliberate, a convenient way to rid themselves of Qui-Gon? He'd been growing more and more frustrated with the Council and their inactivity, the past few years.

Maybe she just needed someone to accuse, though it was hardly as if, after all these years, Qui-Gon hadn't known that what he did was dangerous, or as if he hadn't chosen this path himself. She couldn't blame young Ben, who was dear to her as her own sons. Shivon smiled. Dearest, sometimes, if she were honest. She hadn't been at all disappointed when her children had turned out to be solid and sensible, like their father, with none of the fey abilities that ran down her and Qui-Gon's side of the family, but she'd felt an instant kinship with young Ben, from the first time Qui-Gon had brought the boy home.

Ben had stopped gazing away to the horizon and was looking at her. Perhaps he'd picked up on her train of thought, as Qui-Gon so often had, because he quoted, " 'The Way of the Warrior is death. It means choosing death whenever there is a choice between life and death. If you keep your spirit correct from morning to night, accustomed to the idea of death, resolved on it, and consider yourself as a dead body, thus becoming one with the Way of the Warrior, you can pass through life with no possibility of failure.' " He shrugged and took another drink. "I always thought that the hard part would be coming to terms with the idea of my own death."

" 'Sayings like 'to die with your intention unrealised is to die uselessly' are from the weak, city Way,' " Shivon continued, wondering, as she often had, if where the Jedi had gone wrong was right back at their beginnings. Had the founders of Jedi order tried to incorporate too many warrior traditions, codes that were, by the standards of the modern Republic, completely amoral, into a Way that should have been life-affirming? Was that why the Council sometimes seemed just as

afraid of love and joy as of hate and anger? Or was Shivon too prejudiced, because the Jedi's ways were so different from Tir's traditions? The legendary warriors still remembered here had been as ready to feast as to fight.

Maybe it was Yoda's personal prejudices and fears that were the problem, and his centuries-long domination of the Council.

Or was the explanation the obvious one; that for all their spiritual aspirations, even Jedi weren't immune to the corruptions of temporal power?

" 'That to die having failed is to die uselessly is a mad point of view,' she went on. " 'This is not a shameful thing. It is the most important thing in the Way of the Warrior.'"

"Do you believe that?"

"Not really. Although we Tirians have always had a soft spot for tragedies and glorious failures. But Qui-Gon didn't die thinking he'd failed." *Just with things unsaid*, she realised.

"He was so sure that Anakin is this mythical One."

Shivon shook her head. "I don't believe in messiahs. I'm surprised that Qui-Gon had come to." *And that he was desperate enough to clutch at such straws. Had he come to feel there was no other way?* She studied Ben, who'd always given her hope for what the next generation of Jedi might accomplish. Perhaps the Jedi Council themselves had finally recognised the need for change and flexibility, since they'd agreed so readily to train this Anakin. Rather more readily than they'd agreed to train Ben, although he'd been half Anakin's age. She smiled, remembering the first time Qui-Gon had brought Ben here. He'd had the boy thrust into his arms by a dying refugee, who'd said nothing more than, "This is Ben. Take care of him, Jedi." Shivon's smile broadened. At the time, her brother had found that commission far more daunting than the task of resettling half the population of a planet.

"Maybe not a messiah," Ben was saying thoughtfully. "Perhaps more a catalyst. The legend is of the One who will bring balance to the Force."

"I'm not so sure it's the Force that's unbalanced, Ben. More the Jedi council."

That raised a slight smile. Shivon wondered, facetiously, if there was a rule against Jedi smiling. One which Qui-Gon had, typically, ignored. Sometimes it puzzled her as to why Yoda allowed the Jedi to recruit short-lived, emotional species at all, since he seemingly went to so much effort to train the passion out of them.

Another quote came to mind; " 'Language cannot explain the Way in detail, but it can be grasped intuitively. Study, ponder. If you interpret the meaning loosely you will mistake the Way. If you mistake the Way even a little you will become bewildered and fall into bad ways.'"

"You don't mean to infer that the Council may be confused and have lost the true Way of the Force?" There was, finally, a trace of Ben's normal humour in his voice.

Yes, that's exactly what I believe has happened. Unfortunately, I have no idea what to do about it. For all the many times Qui-Gon and I discussed it.

She sighed. The Jedi might still think of themselves as the Republic's guardians of justice, and there were still those of them, like Qui-Gon, who put the good of others before their own self-advancement. But out here, many people now saw the Jedi as the bureaucrats' enforcers, more interested in how promptly treaties could be imposed and negotiations concluded than how fair the terms were. Many people who might think there wasn't much different between the Sith and the Jedi; that both were trained psychic warriors and manipulators and too dangerous not to closely control.

One didn't need psychic abilities to predict that trouble was brewing. Oh, not this year, nor the next, and maybe not for a few more years after that. But the Republic had been outgrowing itself for a long time now. Anyone with any knowledge of history or understanding of basic systems theory could see that it was going to fall.

But when it did, if she and her colleagues had done their jobs properly, the Tir-Eora system would weather the coming storm, as it had so many others before. It would be a benefit that the locus of power had shifted, to more central worlds like Coruscant and newer societies like Alderaan.

She looked up, past the twinkling pinpoint of light that was Eora. This system was one of the rare ones in which sentient life had evolved on two adjacent planets and space-flight had developed early here. Tir-Eora had had its day as the centre of a trading Empire, before the development of the Mark III hyperdrive had completely changed the economics of interstellar commerce.

Above her head, more lights shone, redder than starlight, some intermittent. Orbital factories stepping up production, space stations and weapons platforms manoeuvring to new positions.

The explanation to the Senate had been that Tir and Eora were upgrading their meteor defences to protect against stray fragments from the break-up of a large mined-out asteroid, and hardening their orbital systems against a predicted cycle

of increased solar activity. That the improvements would be equally effective against non-natural threats was not at all coincidental.

Shivon smiled wryly. She knew that the people like her, who always put their own systems first, were a major cause of the Senate's increasing impotence and irrelevance. But that didn't change what she believed in. She had never had the vision or the energy that Qui-Gon had had, to try to serve the entire Republic. Her focus had always been here, her home. Sometimes she'd wondered if she and her brother had cancelled each other out, she with her visions for Tir-Eora and its colonies, and his of some broader future. And both of them always so sure about what they thought was right, and equally stubborn.

Shaking her head again, she swallowed more whiskey. Enough gloom and doom and worrying about the fate of entire systems and sectors....

She glanced back at Ben. Perhaps she was transposing the comfort she herself found in this familiar, serene landscape onto him, but he seemed more relaxed than when he'd arrived. There was more colour in his face, as if the shadow she'd sensed over him earlier was dissolving in the brisk sea breeze, evaporating in the soft twilight. It was easier to see that, underneath his sorrow and the Jedi training, the lively, enthusiastic boy that he'd been was still there.

Though maybe that was the fresh air and the whiskey.

"Ben," she said. She kept her face straight, but lightened her voice. "Is there a rule that says that now you're a Jedi Knight, you have to speak with that awful Coruscant accent?"

He blinked. "No, not here," he said, as if it had only just occurred to him. "On Coruscant, I was always being told to speak more slowly and clearly, that I should sound like a Jedi."

"Sound like a Jedi?" Shivon smiled. "Speak always obscurely in disordered sentences, mean you?"

That made him grin, which was, she thought, a great improvement. "Correct you are." Ben took another swallow of whiskey. "Obscurely and in suitably portentous tones," he added, rolling the 'r's. He shrugged and said, reverting entirely back to his natural accent, "Qui-Gon always said this was where he came to have a rest from being a Jedi. So maybe I can, too."

Shivon put her hand on his shoulder. "Of course ye can, lad."

"Ye never know," Ben added. "There may come a time when it'll be useful to no sound like a Jedi at a', if I have to."

The breeze hadn't grown any stronger, but Shivon shivered. *Yes, there will.* "Ben," she said, completely serious now, "you do know that, whatever happens, you'll always have a home here, don't you?"

Ben nodded. For a long moment, their eyes met and Shivon was sure that although Ben's visions of the future might be clearer than hers, they were equally troubled.

So much for staying away from the gloom and doom.

Shivon put the little box carefully down and moved her other hand from Ben's shoulder to touch his long braid. "Since you are formally a Jedi Knight now, is it not traditional that you cut this off?"

Removing the braid, she understood, was indicative that the student Jedi now understood the way the Force interwove all life, that he'd seen through the apparent complexity of the universe to its underlying simple truths, which were symbolised by the folds of the Jedis' tunics. In the language spoken by some of the founders of the Jedi Order, so Qui-Gon had explained when he'd still worn a long braid himself, complexity literally meant 'braided together', and simplicity 'folded once', and both 'fold' and braid' derived from the same root word.

"Yes. Only...." Ben looked ruefully at her. "I had this idea that I would do something highly symbolic, and cut it off and throw it on Qui-Gon's pyre. Only I couldn't."

She raised an eyebrow. "They didn't let you?"

"No. It was just.... I think if I could have moved, I'd have thrown myself on the pyre."

"Ben, lad..." Shivon stared at him. However distressed she'd expected him to be over Qui-Gon's death, she hadn't thought he'd react like that. She put her arm round his shoulder.

He was frowning, looking puzzled. "And now I've no idea why I was thinking that.... I've never thought of myself as the suicidal type. "

Shivon had never thought of him as the suicidal type either. Impatient and reckless, yes, and a whole host of other typically youthful traits, but not likely to give up and end it all, however hard life became.

Especially not like that.... She tightened her arm round him. "Ben, it's quite understandable that you were upset. You wouldn't be human if you weren't."

"Just a better Jedi, maybe," he said, the Coruscant accent back in his voice.

"I don't think so. Nor would Qui-Gon."

"I'd forgotten," Ben frowned again. "The funeral arrangements were Senator Palpatine's idea. He said it was the traditional Naboo style of cremation." She felt him shudder and swallow hard. "I'm glad you weren't there. It was horrible."

Shivon had a sudden image of flickering, golden light playing on the young man's face. Like torchlight, except it wasn't a torch that was burning. She moved closer and put both arms round him, drew his head down on her shoulder. Whether that was more to comfort him or herself, she wasn't sure.

After a while, he looked up, still dry-eyed, but his face bleak, and said, "I feel like part of me died with him."

She touched his braid and its ties, the symbols of twenty years of shared experiences and commitment.

Then she sat up straight, releasing Ben. She pulled her knife back out of her boot. Moving slowly, since this should be ceremonial and she wanted Ben to approve what she was doing, she unsheathed her knife. She touched the braid again, waited until Ben nodded and carefully cut it off, just behind his ear. Holding it in one hand, she re-sheathed the knife, then coiled the braid neatly up, the hair soft in her fingers. Equally carefully, she opened the little wooden box, and tucked the braid inside with the ashes.

"I'd rather think that part of him lives on in you."

* * * * *

Ben didn't remember going to sleep. But he must have; the sky was already lightening again, the short night over. He turned his head, finding that he was using his tunic as a pillow. He was lying on his own cloak, with Qui-Gon's over him. He wondered if he'd had the sense to cover himself up with it, or whether Shivon had done so before she went inside. Groggily, he sat up - he shouldn't have drunk so much on an empty stomach - ran his hands through his hair and unwound his braid from round his neck.

His braid?

The wooden box was still sitting on the grass beside him. It was open. Open and empty.

And Ben's braid was back where it had always been, swinging as he stood up.

Part of him said, 'You're dreaming.'

But it felt perfectly real; the salt tang on the breeze, the cries of the gulls, the quiet pounding of the waves. The tide, as it should have, had gone out, leaving wet, seaweed-strewn sand gleaming in the soft pre-dawn light. Wet sand, along which there was a trail of footprints.

There was a small boat drawn up at the end of the beach and a tall man was striding barefoot away from it, towards Ben, his long hair blowing in the wind.

Ben would have recognised that stride anywhere. He'd spent most of his life trying to keep up with it.

Hardly daring to breathe, Ben let the cloak fall from his suddenly nerveless fingers and started, stumbling in disbelief, down the hillside. It couldn't be....

... but it was.

Ignoring the path, Ben ran straight toward the beach, the brisk breeze whipping his braid round his face. Without slowing down, he tossed his head and shrugged it back over his shoulder.

It wasn't possible, but the man was Qui-Gon. He wasn't wearing his tunic, just his pale green under-shirt, which was half-open, its sleeves rolled up. There was no sign of char marks on it and Qui-Gon seemed perfectly healthy and uninjured.

He was running now, too.

Qui-Gon took a few more strides forward, then stopped and held out his arms. Fortunately Ben was already running straight towards him, because suddenly he was crying so hard he couldn't see. He had time for a fleeting, terrified thought that maybe this was an illusion which would vanish when he reached it, before he ran into someone perfectly solid, who had no trouble in withstanding the momentum of Ben's charging headlong into his arms. So Ben deferred thinking about it being impossible and instead just flung his arms round Qui-Gon, burying his head against his chest, like when he'd been a small child.

Qui-Gon felt real, warm. Ben could feel his heartbeat and his breathing, as Qui-Gon put one arm tight round Ben's shoulder and his other hand stroked his hair. Ben should say something.... but he couldn't. He could do nothing but stand there, clinging to Qui-Gon, wondering why, now that he'd started crying, he couldn't stop.

Maybe there was a point to crying now, when he could be comforted.

"Ben."

He'd known that he had missed hearing that familiar, lilting voice.

He just hadn't realised how much, until Qui-Gon spoke. "Ben, it's all right."

And it was.

Just as it always had been....

...except that this wasn't possible.

Ben looked up, swallowing hard as one of Qui-Gon's big, gentle hands touched his face, brushing away the tears. *That was the last thing you ever did, and I couldn't understand why you were so surprised I was crying.*

"You're dead," he said.

"I know." Qui-Gon didn't sound at all worried about it.

He didn't look dead. In fact, he seemed more alive here, larger somehow, standing barefoot on this deserted beach, his long hair blowing in the breeze. He didn't exactly look younger - his face was just as lined, and his hair just as grey - but he was smiling the way he had when his hair had still been brown, back when he'd thought that some combination of reason and passion would show the Council why they should change.

"I tried to reach you," Ben said, past the lump in his throat. "But I couldn't. I couldn't reach you, and I couldn't save you..."

"Ben, it's all right," Qui-Gon repeated, smiling wryly. "I was supposed to be old enough to look after myself."

"And I was supposed to be beside you. But I wasn't....."

"If you had been beside me," Qui-Gon said gently, "you might well be dead too. What's done can't be undone."

"So why are you.... " Ben glanced around at what appeared exactly like solid Tirian reality. "... here?"

"I needed to talk to you."

"Talk to me? About Anakin?"

Qui-Gon shook his head, apparently surprised. "No. Not about Anakin." He looked around, at the quietly pounding waves, at the green slopes that ran down to the water and the higher hills beyond them. He gave a smile which made him look twenty years younger. "For a start, I should thank you for bringing me home." He turned back to Ben, big hands still resting on Ben's shoulders.

"Besides, I was worried about you." He looked at Ben intently, as if searching for something he was relieved not to find. "So I'm glad you came here for your own sake, too. I couldn't see anything clearly on Naboo, but I kept feeling that you were in danger from the Sith." His expression became grim, as he added, "Believe me, being dead and unable to do anything about it was extremely frustrating." His grip on Ben's shoulders tightened, before he shook his head slightly, as if to dismiss some unpleasant image. "I always did worry, when you were upset. Somehow that never got any easier to deal with as you got older."

"And it didn't occur to you that I'd be really upset about you dying?"

"Well, I hadn't been planning on dying." Qui-Gon gave another self-deprecating smile. "And once I was....there were so many things I should have told you that there wasn't time to say. I meant what I said on Naboo, Ben. You were a good padawan and you are a wiser man than I am. I'm proud of you."

Ben wiped his nose on his sleeve. "And I should have told you...." He stopped. He'd had a long list of everything he ought to have said, but all the words he'd planned to use had mysteriously evaporated. "Master, I...."

But when it came down to it, he didn't need many words.

He looked up into Qui-Gon's eyes. "Thank you. For everything. I never needed any other family, once I had you."

Then he added, "I don't know how you put up with me." He sighed. "It's only been two days and Anakin is already driving me up the wall. I suppose I just don't like children."

"I wasn't too keen on children myself, when I was your age. I didn't want an apprentice either. In fact I thought that insisting I train you myself was a scheme of the Council's to keep me occupied and out of trouble. Only you were not at all impressed by the alternative." Qui-Gon was smiling reminiscently.

Ben smiled too, remembering being five years old, clinging onto Qui-Gon's leg, determined that he was going to stay with this kind, tall man, wherever he was going, not remain on Coruscant with Yoda. "I'm very glad you changed your mind, Master. I don't think I'd have been at all happy as Master Yoda's padawan."

Qui-Gon grinned and ruffled Ben's hair. "No, I don't think you would have been."

"And I was happy with you, even when training was hard work, or I didn't understand why you insisted I do some things...." Ben fingered his braid, thinking back over his life. "Even if I never said so at the time."

Qui-Gon draped the braid over one hand, touching with the other the ties that symbolised Ben's commitments to his training and to his sensei. "That didn't matter. You could have requested another teacher if you'd wanted to."

Ben shook his head and grinned. "I didn't want another sensei. Not for more than a few hours, when I was in a bad mood."

Qui-Gon's fingers continued up the braid, to the last tie, the one just behind Ben's ear. "And I should have told you that you were ready to become a Jedi."

Ben grinned again. "Even though I still have much to learn about the Force?"

"So do all Jedi at your age. I know I did." Qui-Gon grinned too. "So do most of them at any age and some of them would be much the better for remembering that, young pada -" he stopped himself. " - young Jedi."

Ben didn't bother asking Qui-Gon how he knew that the Council had decided he was worthy to be a Jedi Knight. His sensei was pulling a small knife from his belt. He didn't bother worrying that this had happened already either. Just stood quietly, as Qui-Gon cut the braid off and wrapped it several times round his wrist, like a bracelet.

Ben had to be imagining this, but it felt much more real than kneeling listening to Yoda's pronouncements on Naboo had.

Qui-Gon looked up again. "Don't worry if it takes you a while to come to like Anakin, or if looking after him seems a daunting responsibility now. I should also have told you.... When you first became my padawan, I would never have believed that I had it in me to love anyone as much as I love you, Ben, *mac-mo-chridh*, son-of-my-heart."

* * * * *

It wasn't yet dawn when Shivon woke up.

She went outside. Young Ben was asleep on the grassy bank, Qui-Gon's cloak still over him, as she'd placed it last night.

Somehow she was not at all surprised to see her brother kneeling beside him.

Qui-Gon ruffled Ben's hair. Shivon noticed that he had Ben's braid wrapped round his right wrist. He kissed the lad's forehead, then stood up and smiled ruefully at her. He spread his arms. "I'm sorry."

"For getting killed? Well, I've had plenty practice at missing you."

"I'm sorry about that, too."

"No need. You always did what you believed you had to."

"And so did you."

They smiled at each other. Shivon said, as she stepped forward to hug him, "You wouldn't have been yourself if you hadn't, and it's yourself I love."

* * * * *

"Ben?" Someone was gently shaking his shoulder.

He sat up, pushing back the cloak that covered him, blinking at Shivon. It was full daylight now.

He ran his hand behind his ear, found no braid. Squinting in the bright sunlight, he looked down towards the beach. There was no boat, and no footprints, although the tide had turned again and covered the sand.

It had felt so real...

Ben could rationalise this. Fasting was a time-honoured way of producing visions, even without drinking half a bottle of potent spirits on an empty stomach. Or it could have been directed dreaming, or his subconscious conjuring up what he wanted to see.

He didn't want to rationalise it.

Shivon was standing quietly, looking out over the estuary. She seemed very peaceful, almost happy.

"I saw him," Ben said, wondering if she'd think he was crazy.

But she just smiled, eyes still on the horizon, and said, "So did I."

Shivon gazed out over the water for a while longer, then looked down at Ben. Perhaps she should have let him sleep; he still looked very tired. But the dark shadow she'd sensed over him had gone and he no longer seemed as shell-shocked and miserable as he had yesterday.

He didn't look very much like a Jedi Knight either, with the back of his hair escaped from its ponytail and standing on end, and his shirt all ruffled. Much more like the boy he'd been when she'd first met him.

She gave in to the impulse to ruffle his hair.

He smiled at her, then knelt up and started folding up Qui-Gon's cloak. "I thought you should have this," he began, no trace at all of a Coruscant accent in his voice, "since there was so little else I could bring back to you."

"You brought back what mattered."

Ben nodded, head bowed over the cloak. "I - " He sank back on his haunches, rubbing the back of his hand over his eyes, looking almost surprised by the tears that had started rolling down his face.

"Ben..." She knelt down and put her arms round him, rocking him like a child. "It's all right."

At first, he thought that she simply meant that it was all right to cry. But he was thinking more clearly this morning and the future no longer seemed so bleak. All even the most adept Jedi Master could predict was possibilities and no one's life was predestined. Anakin's future might be potentially clouded, but so was everyone's. That didn't mean it had to happen. Maybe Ben would find the wisdom that Qui-Gon believed he had in him and train Anakin well. Whether he was the One or not, perhaps Anakin would help bring balance, if not to the Force, at least to the Jedi Order.

"Yes," he said, voice muffled as he leant his head on her shoulder, "I think maybe it all will be."

end

Author's Notes:

The sayings about the Way of the Warrior quoted by Ben and Shivan are paraphrased from *Ha Gakure* (Hidden Leaves) by Yamamoto Tsunenori and from *Go Rin No Sho* (A Book of Five Rings) by Miyamoto Musashi.

Although I was very impressed with the way Ewan McGregor kept up young Obi-Wan's Alec Guinness-like English accent, to my biased Scottish ears his own accent is much nicer.

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